Book Review: The Great Regression edited by Heinrich Geiselberger

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How do we make sense of the dramatic political changes of recent months? In **The Great Regression**, *editor* **Heinrich Geiselberger** *brings together contributors including Nancy Fraser, Arjun Appadurai and Bruno Latour to grapple with the causes and consequences of this ostensible 'great regression'. While questioning the tendency to centralise 'the left' as the prime site of blame,* **Elisa Pannini** *praises this cross-national collection for offering valuable food for thought when it comes to considering the burning political questions of the moment.*

***The Great Regression*. Heinrich Geiselberger (ed.). Polity. 2017.**

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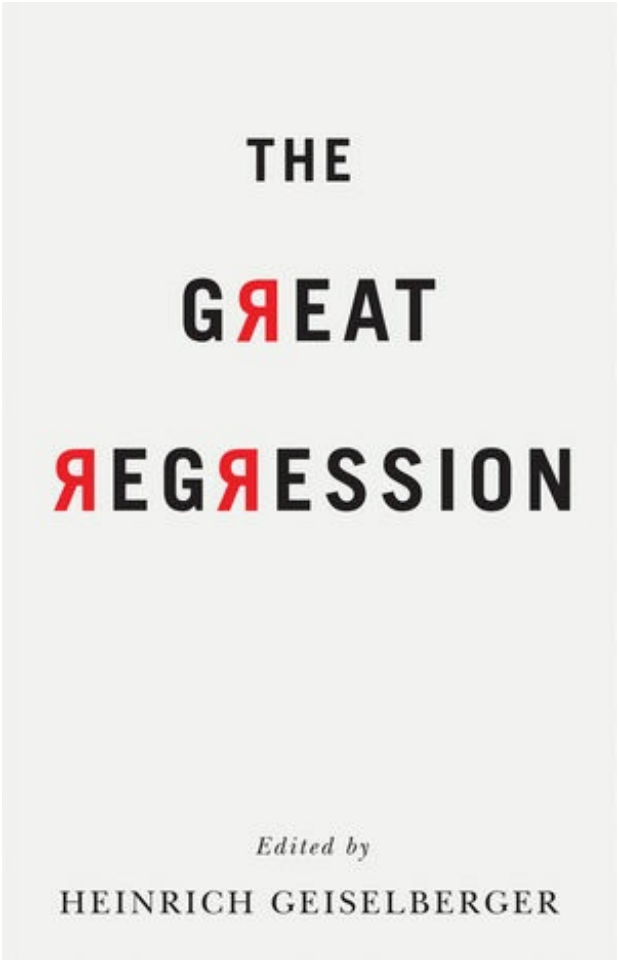

At the end of 2016, after the British vote to leave the European Union and the US election of President Donald Trump, academics and pundits have been discussing what was driving voters to make these controversial choices. The new trends in politics seem to have in common a refusal of liberal elites and progressive discourse, opposition to migratory flux and cosmopolitan identities and a fascination for populist and uncompromising characters with nationalist and extreme-right bents.

Coming up with a convincing explanation of this allegedly transnational phenomenon is not an easy task, and much ink has already been spilled in the attempt. Last November, one of the *LSE Review of Books* sister blogs featured two posts respectively titled 'Trump and Brexit: why it's again NOT the economy, stupid' and 'The Brexit-Trump Syndrome: it's the economics, stupid', highlighting one of the main sources of disagreement in the debate: what is at the roots of these events? Is it economic impoverishment and the rage of the 'losers' of globalisation? Or is it just a matter of personal values and identity? *The Great Regression* is a collection of essays by distinguished scholars, journalists and writers – including Slavoj Žižek, Zygmunt Bauman, Nancy Fraser and Bruno Latour – that tackles these issues.

When I first approached the book, I felt unease at engaging in a conversation with other members of the global educated class about what are often considered deplorable and dangerous political views, even though they are widespread enough in the population to win ballots. As Wolfgang Streeck puts it in Chapter Thirteen, the proclivity to trust populist leaders is commonly diagnosed by many pundits on the left as a 'cognitive problem'. However, I was quickly reassured, because not one of the essays in *The Great Regression* stigmatises the people who cast their vote in favour of Brexit or Trump's presidency. On the contrary, there is a common undertone of reprimand for the 'globally bourgeoisified left' – again, the words of Streeck – that failed to foresee and prevent the current social and economic situation, and that is now struggling to make sense of people's reaction to this.

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As pointed out by editor Heinrich Geiselberger in the preface, most contributors blame those events on the neoliberal character of the global world we are living in. Nancy Fraser's Chapter Four identifies 'progressive neoliberalism' as the cause of the rise of 'reactionary populism', but also deems traditional centre-left parties as guilty of betraying the working classes and flirting with business and finance. Fraser stresses the responsibilities of politicians like Bill Clinton and Tony Blair during the 1990s in preparing the ground for today's events, suggesting that progress on gender, sexual orientation, religion and ethnicity-related issues has been used to 'gloss over' economically regressive policies. While the analysis is compelling, the blame is so focused on the left that the reader would be excused for forgetting how the biggest blows to the welfare state and workers' rights in the UK and US came from those Conservative and Republican governments that are again on the rise in this confusing historical period.

An interesting feature of the book is its cross-national breadth. Not only it is being published simultaneously in thirteen languages, but its contributors also come from many countries and offer different perspectives and approaches. Even though all keep referring to Donald Trump and Brexit as the main examples of the phenomenon they are discussing, some of the authors bring fresh instances by referring to other countries, like Eva Illouz in Chapter Five on the rise of populist right-wing parties in Israel.

In Chapter One, Arjun Appadurai discusses the transnational phenomenon of fascination for populist authoritarian leaders by also referencing the successes of Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Viktor Orbán. He argues that the loss of economic sovereignty of nation-states has produced a shift toward emphasising cultural sovereignty, which in turn leads to the rise of authoritarian populism. His diagnosis of a 'democracy fatigue' pushing democracy to destroy itself may seem at odds with the spread of grassroots movements around the world; on the other hand, the recent result of the Turkish constitutional referendum seems to rather confirm this self-destructive trend for democracy. In general, a possible critique of this broad comparative approach is that all the countries he mentions are facing distinct and peculiar challenges. Turkey, for instance, is involved in complex international and local conflicts that go beyond the neo-liberalism issue and play a major role in national political discourse.

The dimension of personal values and identity is not ignored in the book. Even though the economic context is always considered as being at the root of the problems, some of the essays focus on the dynamics that bring people

to make decisions based on other considerations than personal economic interest. In Chapter Nine, Pankaj Mishra highlights a mechanism that potentially explains part of the recent 'political absurdism' that sees both the 'left behinds' and richer classes represented by tycoons of questionable morals. He writes about '*ressentiment*, an existential resentment of other people's being', caused by the coexistence in modern societies of formal equality and everyday experiences of massive differences in power and status. Similarly, in Chapter Eleven, Oliver Nachtwey discusses feelings of resentment, driven by 'material and status anxieties' that lead to a process of 'decivilisation' whereby rage and hatred are openly expressed. Again, this phenomenon can be observed across the class hierarchy.

As a whole, *The Great Regression* has the merit of providing food for thought on the burning issue of contemporary political trends. The different perspectives offered by authors from various backgrounds give a wide range of elements worth considering when trying to understand what is happening to our democracies. Overall, the book stands by the 'it's the economics, stupid' stance, but also manages to provide interesting considerations on emerging cultural and identitarian elements. However, it is probably too soon to say how accurate the overall picture is: any analysis of specific events that aspires at being generalised as a worldwide phenomenon tends to suffer due to the shortness and proximity of the timespan being considered. *The Great Regression* is a good read for scholars and the general public and can be an interesting starting point for one's own reflections and considerations on recent political changes. A necessary caveat: it is unlikely that Trump or Brexit enthusiasts will find any pleasure in reading a book that tries to be objective but, following C. Wright Mills motto, does not claim to be detached.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.